On the Subject of Sports Injuries

In Jeb Golinkin’s essay *Why Parents Should Let Their Kids Play Dangerous Sports*, Golinkin criticizes the move to scurry children away from playing dangerous sports using pathos in order to demonstrate the move as a loss of “human spirit.” Golinkin, however, downplays the risks of injuries he briefly mentions by appealing to his audience's emotions ineffectively. While sports provide children physical and psychological skills that are beneficiary to their development, more safeguards should be placed on the more harmful sports to ensure the well being and future success of the young athletes.

With childhood obesity rates at their highest than the last three decades, the benefits of sports have come to the forefront of the minds of the American people. However, sports are accompanied with risks, and minimizing the risks is crucial to ensure children are able to draw on the benefits sports provide. The benefits of sports have been well documented: promoting strong and healthy bone and muscle development; reducing the risks of diseases such as heart diseases and obesity; reducing depression and increasing “psychological well-being” (Menestrel, Suzanne, Perkins). The benefits of sports do not stop at the physiological level either. It has been reported that adolescents that participate in sports have a higher resiliency, meaning they are able to deal with tough situations more effectively when compared with those who do not participate. It has also been shown that student athletes are unlikely to experience social isolation and report higher memory levels and cognitive function (Menestrel, Suzanne, Perkins). The benefits have been studied extensively and convey an overarching message: sports are great
for health. Often however, studies fail to include one major risk that is accompanied with sports in their research; injuries.

Sports contain an innate risk of injuries, and some injuries are common sight; a sprained joint, a popped shoulder, or a fractured limb. Unfortunately, major injuries are not as rare as one would hope. It is projected that 115,000 emergency room visits in the Pacific North will be due to sports injuries and that half of them will be experienced by athletes under the age of 22 (Sun Life Financial, Inc). Not only is the rate of injuries high in high school and collegiate sports, but the fiscal cost of injuries are crippling as well. In a state wide study of high school sports injuries in North Carolina, it was found that the total cost per injury was $13,364 and the annual state cost amounted to $199.2 million. When analyzing the injuries per sport, the more aggressive contact sports were found to have a higher injury rate, with football holding 53.8% of the injuries (Knowles, S.B). It is clear that sports injuries are a significant health risk, and when delving into the types of injuries, it gets more complicated. Head injuries have long been under reported due to their lack of visible effects, however brain injury is a serious hazard and far too common. Brain injuries do not require fractures in the skull and their cause is difficult to pinpoint making it difficult to protect against them (Piazza, Stephen).

Football provides an environment where the brain is constantly exposed to external forces, and is the reason why concussions rates are the highest in football than any other sport (Piazza, Stephen). Brain trauma is too grave of an injury to ignore and these sports increase the risk significantly. In some cases, two players can crash into each other with a force of approximately 665 newtons (N) each, and resulting in a collision of a total of 1,330 N resulting in an experience of approximately 298 lbs of force. These factors and several others can lead to
traumatic brain injury which can lead to an array of health issues. Recently however, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy has seen a rise in diagnoses as brain injuries in sports continue.

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE, is a neurological disease that little is known of. Studies have been restricted to sports related injuries, but what has been found is of concern. CTE has been found in athletes that have suffered traumatic brain injury, and to make matters worse, it can only be diagnosed after death. However, studies have suggested that CTE can lead to memory loss, loss of cognitive function, and depression. (Maroon, Joseph). There has also been a high number of football players that have committed suicide and were diagnosed with CTE after the autopsy. These types of injuries can be reduced significantly. The safest way to prevent such trauma would be to completely avoid playing sports, but injury prevention steps can be taken to significantly reduce the risk.

Although injury prevention programs have been implemented to sports on all levels, more can be done to reduce the risk of serious injuries even further. In the case of football, rules have already been set on hits that are deemed as dangerous. Hitting a defenseless player not only results in a penalty, but can come with a fine and possibly suspension. The National Football League (NFL) has even implemented a program where the athletes are taught “safe” tackling techniques, but there is little evidence of these programs “reducing concussive injuries” nor do they address the long term effects of brain injury (Bachynski, Kathleen, Goldberg). Furthermore, the culture around football encourages big hits. These big hits are often the subject of conversation on ESPN highlights and are often praised by fans. Hits, however, provide a larger impulse force than tackles as the player is suddenly brought to a complete stop more quickly than they would be if tackled properly. So not only are the current efforts to reduce concussions and
other sports injuries not enough, but the culture around the sports encourage dangerous behaviors that lead to injury.

While safety equipment can help reduce the rate of injuries, the safety standards are often set by the sports organizations themselves lowering their efficiency due to bias. When setting standards, their goal is to reduce injury risk to “tolerable levels” (Bachynski, Kathleen, Goldberg). Evidence of the failures of these safety standards can be seen with the introduction of helmets in hockey and football. These helmets were often portrayed as the perfect fix for all head injuries, and although they did help reduce the number of fatalities and skull fractures, there is no evidence proving that they help prevent traumatic brain injury despite claims from the NFL (Bachynski, Kathleen, Goldberg). There is however, sure ways to significantly reduce the frequency of brain injury in hockey and football immediately. In hockey, body checks are a legal tactic where a player uses their body to block an opposing player. Despite body checks accounting for “86% of injuries in hockey,” (Bachynski, Kathleen, Goldberg) no modifications have been taken towards body checks. In the football, kick off plays involve players sprinting at full speeds in attempt to bring down the carrier. The kick off has been considered an especially violent play by customary standards in the NFL, yet little has been done to this play to reduce injuries (Bachynski, Kathleen, Goldberg). Body checks and kick offs can be more heavily regulated or removed altogether greatly reducing the numbers of injuries without drastically changing the game.

With sports injuries being brought to national attention, there will be an increase in injury education; allowing children and adolescents to make well informed decisions that will lead to a decrease in serious injuries. Progress on injury safety has been slow; most of the safety guards in
place today were placed within the last three decades, but with added pressure from a well
educated public to these sports organizations, the standard of safety can be raised beyond the
“injury risk tolerable” level.

Works Cited

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